

# DEFINING MOMENTS

Two leading foreign journalists in Japan discuss the response of the Government, media and ordinary people to the March 11 disaster.

## How do you think the media handled the story?

**Julian Ryall:** In the first few days we saw knee-jerk responses in much of the coverage overseas. The photographs on the front pages were horrific enough, but some of the headlines and stories were totally unjustified. That was partly the fault of the Japanese news sources, because [in the case of the nuclear accident] with TEPCO not giving out anything useful to the Ministries, the foreign media fell back on rumor and hyperbole. The Japanese Government needs to do a better job of getting its message across, because if they don't, they run the risk of other people doing it for them.

**Gavin Blair:** I disagree. Some of what was published was just blatant sensationalism, designed to sell papers. However, it's true that initially there was a lack of information and then a flood of vague

information coming out of the Ministries.

## What is the mood in the disaster-stricken area today?

**JR:** I sense people are resigned to their lot now. They want more from the Government, of course, to move out of the school halls into their own space, for example. The Government fell 2,500 short of its target of providing 30,000 temporary homes by the end of May, which given all the problems, is pretty good. Three months after the quake, the region is still in the early stages of recovery. You go up there and you see a fire brigade from Kobe and a police team from Akita—and that's wonderful. In Japan this disaster won't be forgotten.

**GB:** The Japanese media have kept on the story too.

## Traditional industries in the region have been badly damaged. How will the region respond?

**JR:** One commentator I spoke to suggested



Julian Ryall (left) covered the March 11 disaster for the *Daily Telegraph*, *South China Morning Post*, *Scotsman* and *Agence France-Presse*, among other media outlets. Gavin Blair (right) covered the disaster for the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Global Post*, Fox TV and Al Jazeera, among other media outlets.

turning that vast tract of contaminated land around the nuclear plant into a colossal wind farm or huge solar plant. They'll have no planning issues. They should go for it big time. Provide energy to northern Japan through wind and solar plants on a huge scale. They have no choice but to look for alternatives.

**GB:** The last time Japan faced a crisis like this was the oil shock in the early 1970s. The result was an increase in efficiency in Japanese industry. That is likely to happen again. Japan will look to increase its use of renewable energy...

**JR:** Logically, yes. Japanese companies are experts in advanced technologies; hopefully, the disaster of March 11 might just encourage an increased take up of what they are good at. In the past there has been a reluctance to incorporate new technologies in Japan, sometimes because they are a bit more expensive than what the country already has, but problems have been exposed with conventional energy sources, and the uptake of alternative energy sources should now increase, even if they are more expensive. The attitude must be: For the good of all of us, let's do this anyway!

### **Prime Minister Kan recently announced Japan aims to install solar panels on the roofs of 10 million houses by 2020.**

**GB:** That's ambitious, but clearly there will be a big push.

**JR:** I'd love to see it. Japan needs new industries to get the economy going again.

### **How would you rate Japan's prospects at this time?**

**GB:** If Japan has been shaken out of its complacency then the long-term prognosis is good. Japanese young people have come in for a lot of criticism in recent years, but as many commentators have said, this could be a defining moment for the way they look at things. Japanese people are incredibly resilient. It's when the pressure's on that you find out about people, and the people really did impress me after this disaster. Nevertheless, Japan faces many difficulties: an aging population, huge national debt, problems in the political process, the economic downturn and now the disaster of March 11. I hope that in confronting these difficulties Japan can become a proper democracy, but keep all the good things about the country as well.

**JR:** I'm very optimistic, especially if lessons are learned and companies clean up their acts. There is an island mentality here of, we're all in this together, and that sense of community will surely stand Japan in good stead. After the quake, we saw everyone working together, pitching in. The people in the shelters had next to nothing, but they'd wait patiently for crackers or water; we saw no pushing in line...

**GB:** People were actually trying to give us their food supplies. I remember leaving one shelter and someone had lined up our shoes by the door. Thinking of other people at a time like that... 'You've done well,' they'd say, 'coming up from Tokyo. Take care of yourself.'... Truly, truly humbling. 